

PANAMA 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Representatives of the U.S. embassy met regularly with Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.6 million (July 2013 estimate). The government does not collect statistics on religious affiliation, but various sources estimate that 75 to 85 percent of the population is Roman Catholic and 15 to 25 percent is evangelical Christian. Smaller religious groups are found primarily in Panama City or other, larger urban areas. These include Seventh-day Adventists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, Buddhists, Bahais, and Rastafarians. There are also groups of evangelicals and Mormons in small towns. Baptists, Methodists, and Lutherans derive their membership in large part from the Afro-Antillean and expatriate communities.

The Jewish and Muslim communities have approximately 12,000 members each. The Jewish community is centered largely in Panama City. Muslims live primarily in Panama City and Colon. Indigenous religions include Ibeorgun (among Kuna), Mamatata and Mamachi (among Ngobe Bugle), and Embera (among Embera), found in their respective indigenous communities throughout the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. The constitution provides for freedom of religion, provided that "Christian morality and public order" are respected.

PANAMA

Catholicism has certain state-sanctioned advantages over other faiths. The constitution recognizes Catholicism as “the religion of the majority” of citizens but does not designate it as the official state religion.

The constitution limits the public offices religious leaders may hold to those related to social assistance, education, and scientific research.

The constitution forbids the formation of political parties based on religion. It grants religious associations legal status so they may manage and administer their property within the limits prescribed by law, the same status granted other “juridical persons.” The Ministry of Government grants “juridical personality” through a relatively simple and transparent process. Juridical personality allows a religious group to apply for all tax benefits available to nonprofit organizations.

Under immigration law, most foreign religious workers are granted temporary missionary worker visas that must be renewed every two years for up to six years total. Catholic priests and nuns and Jewish rabbis are eligible for a special, automatic six-year visa.

The constitution requires teaching of Catholicism in public schools; however, parents have the right to exempt their children from religious instruction.

Government Practices

There were no reports of significant government actions affecting religious freedom.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Representatives of the U.S. embassy met regularly with Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim leaders. The Ambassador met several times with Catholic Archbishop Ulloa. He attended a Seder ceremony at the invitation of members of Panama’s Jewish community at Temple Kol Shearith and attended services at a wide range of places of worship.